DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 270 275 RC 015 781

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|---|---|
| TITLE | Winnebago Basketry. |
| INSTITUTION | Minneapolis Public Schools, Minn. |
| SPONS AGENCY | Minnesota State Dept. of Education, St. Paul. Indian Section. |
| PUB DATE | 79 |
| NOTE | 34p.; Appended photographs may not reproduce clearly. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | Special School District No. 1, Minneapolis Public Schools: Planning, Development and Evaluation, 807 Northeast Broadway, Minneapolis, MN 55413-2398 ($3.50 ea., plus $5.00 billing charge unless prepaid). |
| PUB TYPE | Guides - Classroom Use - Materials (For Learner) (051) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS. |
| DESCRIPTORS | American Indians; *American Indian Studies; Art Appreciation; Craft Workers; *Cultural Activities; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Enrichment; *Design Crafts; Elementary Education; Handicrafts; *Resource Units |
| IDENTIFIERS | *Basket Weaving; *Winnebago (Tribe); Wisconsin |

ABSTRACT

Developed for elementary students, the booklet explains how Winnebago people weave baskets from the bark of the black ash tree. The booklet begins with a poem about Grandma making a basket and a story about how basket-weaving came to the Winnebago people. Both are illustrated with line drawings. The following section uses black and white photographs and short narratives to explain the procedure of making Winnebago baskets. A brief description of the black ash tree and a list of resource materials conclude the booklet. (ERB)

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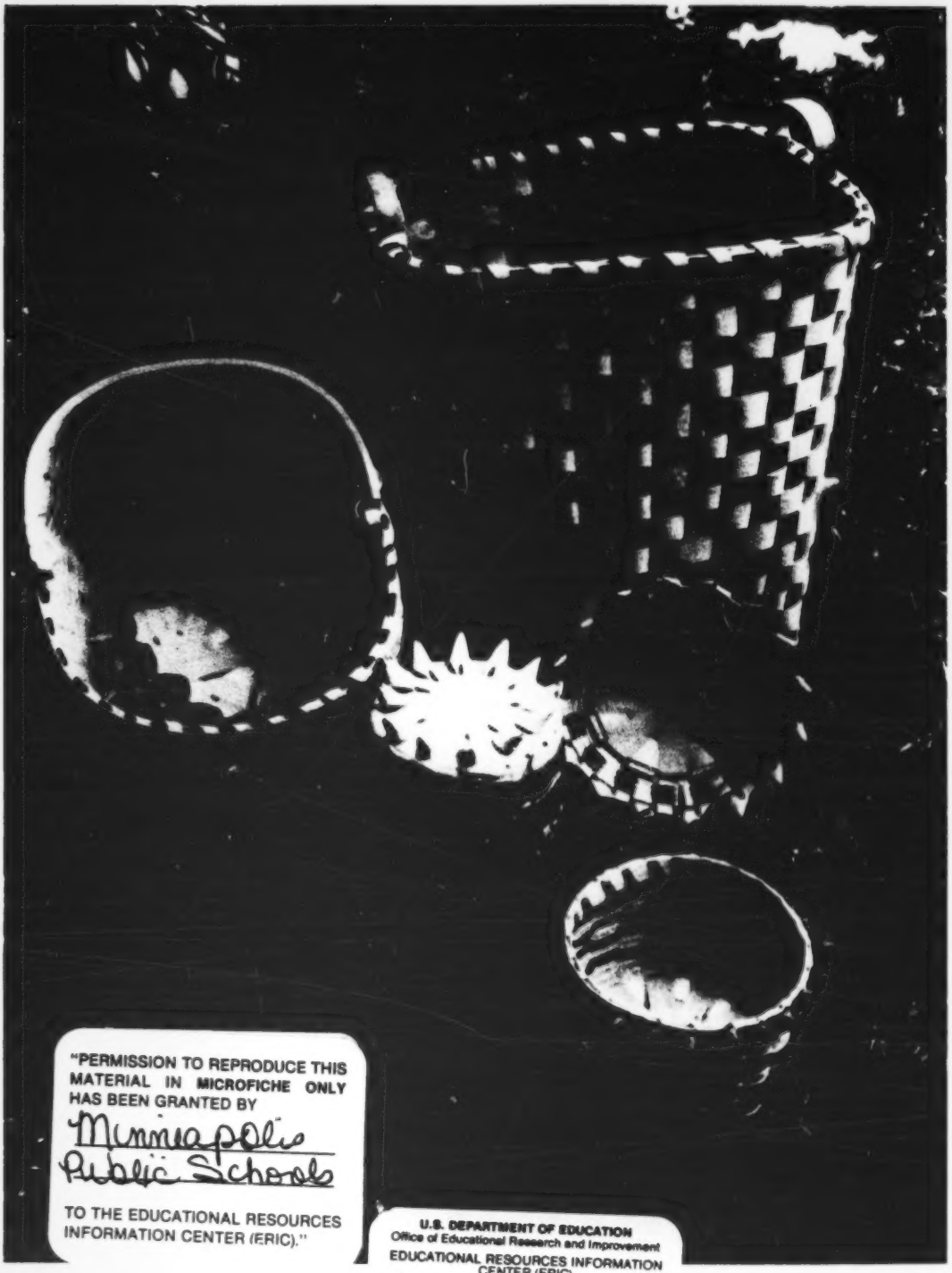

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# WINNEBAGO BASKETRY



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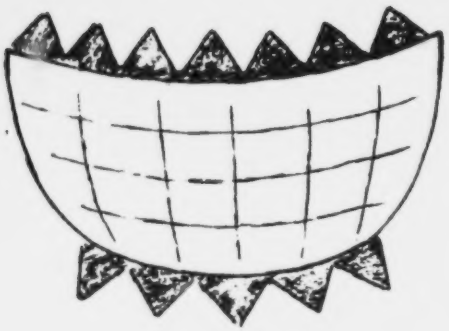

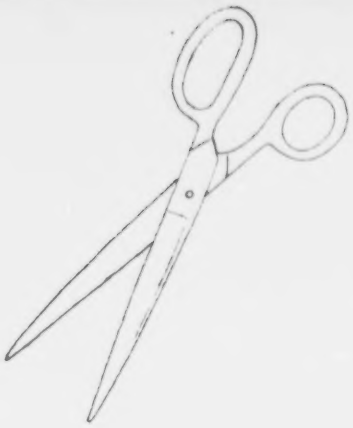

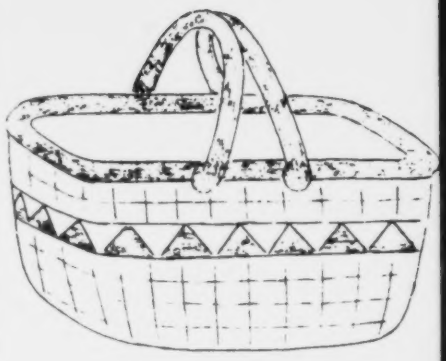

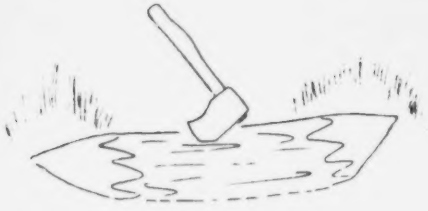

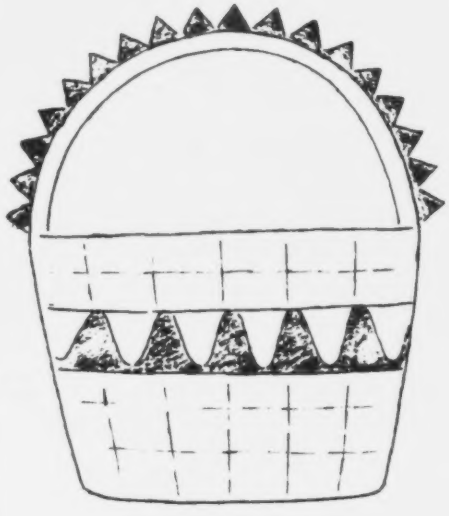

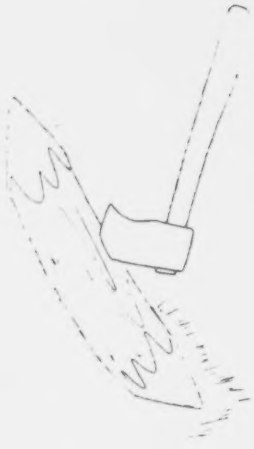

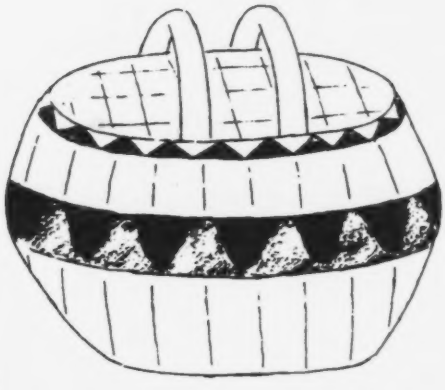

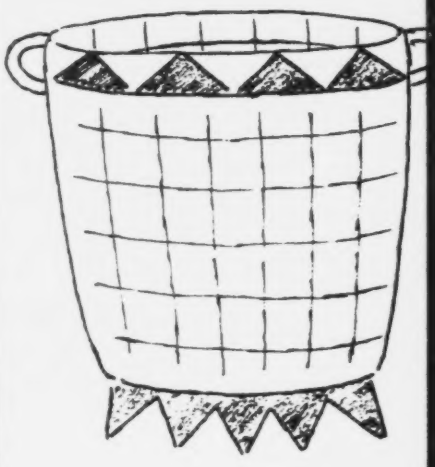

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# INDIAN ELEMENTARY CURRICULUM PROJECT



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# FOREWORD

## *A FAMILY TRADITION*

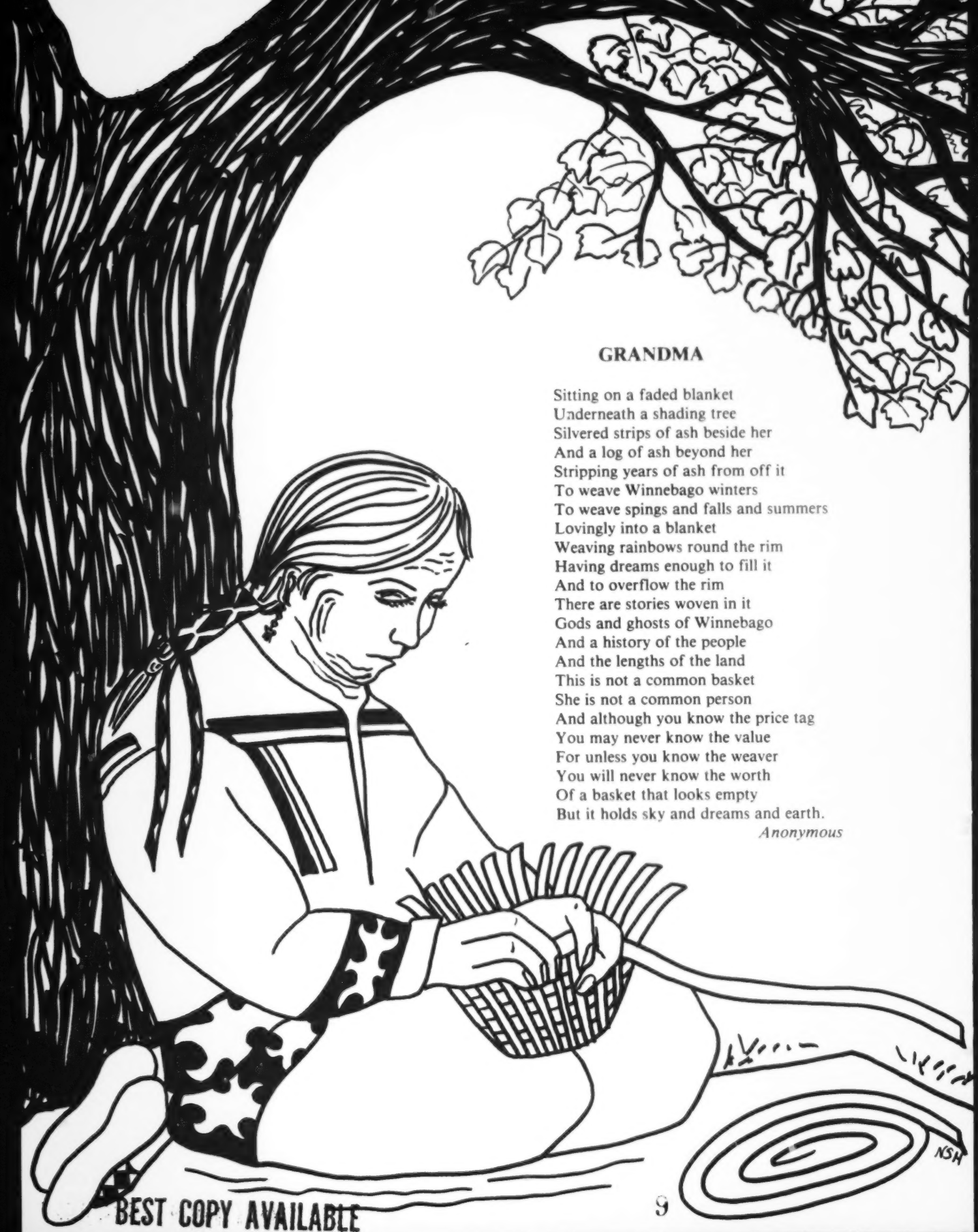
Basketry has been handed down through the generations within the family structure of Wisconsin Winnebagos. Daughters learn how to weave through carefully observing their mothers. Young girls begin weaving by picking up bits of ash and experimenting with them. One Wisconsin Winnebago basket maker remembers not having a scissors to use when she was small. In order to be able to weave, she separated strips of ash with her teeth. As a girl grows older, her mother gives her a part in making baskets. She gradually learns which thicknesses of strips work well, and how to carefully shape a basket.

Similarly, young boys watch their fathers perform their special tasks. When a boy is strong enough, he begins pounding and stripping the logs, putting on bindings, and carving handles.

Groups of families often join together for basket making. Friendships and family ties are strengthened through working, talking, and joking together as the baskets are made. Stories are told, old times are remembered, and a festive atmosphere is shared by all.

Baskets, a necessity for the Winnebago, were used as carriers and containers in woodland life. It has only been since the Depression of the 1930's that Winnebagos began selling their baskets in the market.[1] Previously baskets were traded for other goods among the Winnebagos. Today there is a large demand for the baskets.

[1]Interview with Henry Greencrow at Center School by Nancy Hands on February 1, 1979.



## GRANDMA

Sitting on a faded blanket
Underneath a shading tree
Silvered strips of ash beside her
And a log of ash beyond her
Stripping years of ash from off it
To weave Winnebago winters
To weave spings and falls and summers
Lovingly into a blanket
Weaving rainbows round the rim
Having dreams enough to fill it
And to overflow the rim
There are stories woven in it
Gods and ghosts of Winnebago
And a history of the people
And the lengths of the land
This is not a common basket
She is not a common person
And although you know the price tag
You may never know the value
For unless you know the weaver
You will never know the worth
Of a basket that looks empty
But it holds sky and dreams and earth.

*Anonymous*

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# HOW BASKETS CAME TO THE WINNEBAGO PEOPLE

A long time ago, a young Winnebago girl had a dream. In her dream, she learned that she would have difficult times and would need help in her adult life. She also dreamed that she was walking through a wooded area when a black ash tree spoke to her. The tree said, "Some day I will help you."



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When the girl reached adulthood, she met a man from her tribe and they married. As the years passed, the couple had three children.



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While her children were still young, the woman's difficulties began. Her husband died, leaving her alone to provide for the family. The woman was greatly saddened. Each day she would go into the woods to a place where no one could see her. There, she would mourn her great loss.



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One day while she was crying along in the woods, she heard a creaking sound. As she listened more closely, she heard these words: "I will help you."



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When the woman looked around again, she realized that the voice had come from a nearby black ash tree. At first she was frightened, but then she remembered her dream of long ago. Maybe this was the very tree that had once said it would help her.



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She walked over to the tree and listened. As she drew near, it spoke again, and said, "Peel off my bark." As the woman followed the tree's instructions, she realized that it was going to help her. She peeled a strip of bark lengthwise from the tree. Then the ash said, "Separate it into layers."



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Once the woman had followed these directions, she realized she could weave the layers together. Carefully, using all of her ability, she shaped the strips of ash until she had made a basket.



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When the basket was finished, the woman went back to her children and showed them what she had made. The children were very pleased and returned with her to the black ash tree to gather more strips.





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The woman made more baskets. They had many uses. She traded some of them for food and kept others to use at home.



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The children sat by their mother as she wove the baskets and helped whenever they could. As the family worked together, they became strong again.



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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Winnebago woman expressed her great sadness by going out to the woods to cry alone. How do you express your feelings when you are very sad?

2. The black ash tree helped the woman by offering its bark to her. How has someone helped you when you really needed help?

3. The woman figured out how to make a basket in her time of great need. How have you helped yourself when you were experiencing great difficulty?

4. The Winnebago people have passed down the tradition of basketmaking in their families for many years. What tradition or teaching has been passed on to you in your family?

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# MAKING WINNEBAGO BASKETS

Winnebago baskets begin with the selection of the right black ash tree.



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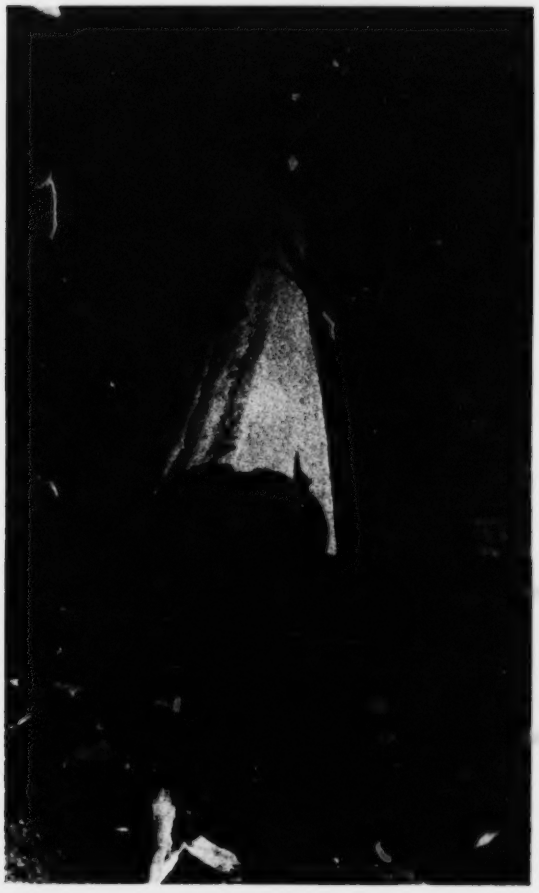
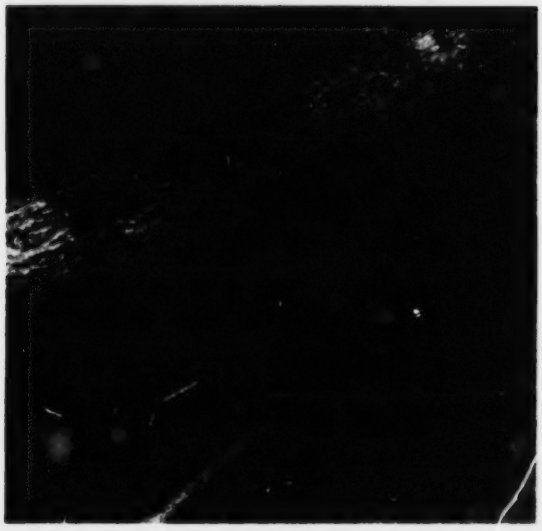
First the bark must be scraped from the tree. Next the growth layers are loosened by pounding up and down the log with the end of a large axe. Then the loosened layers are pulled off the log.





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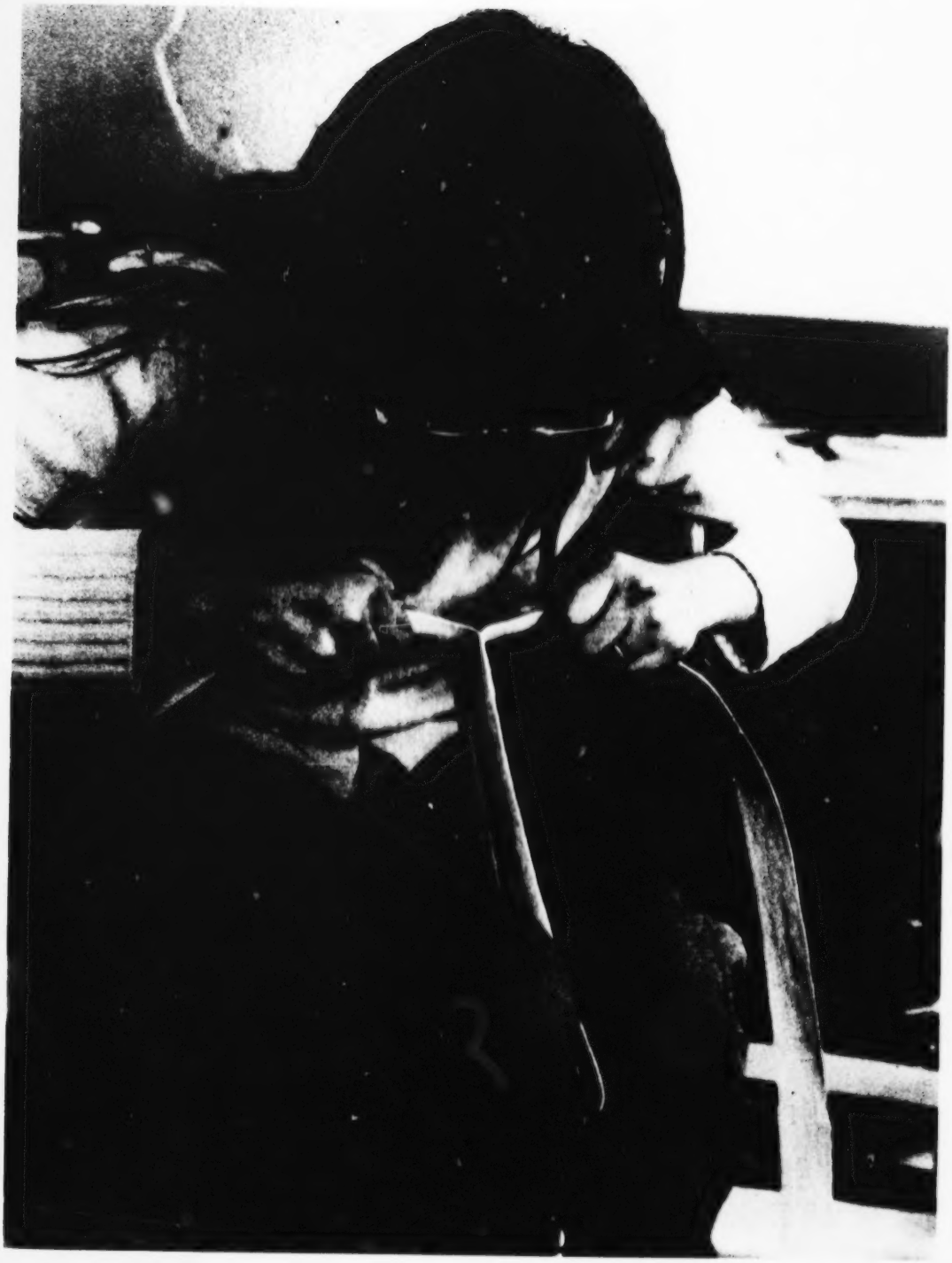

Families work together to split the layers into thin strips to prepare for weaving. The strips must be split apart before the wood dries out. After the layers are separated, they are shaved with a jacknife.



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The strips vary in thickness and each thickness has a special use in making a basket.



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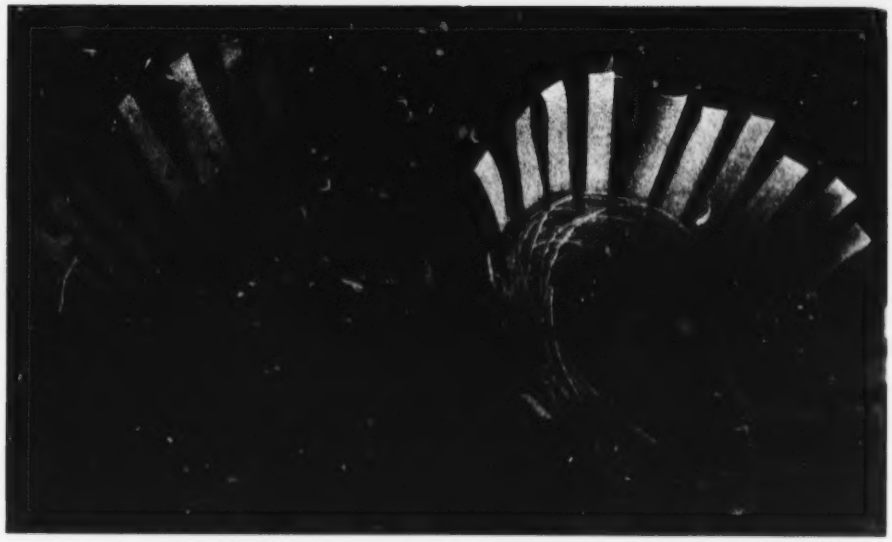
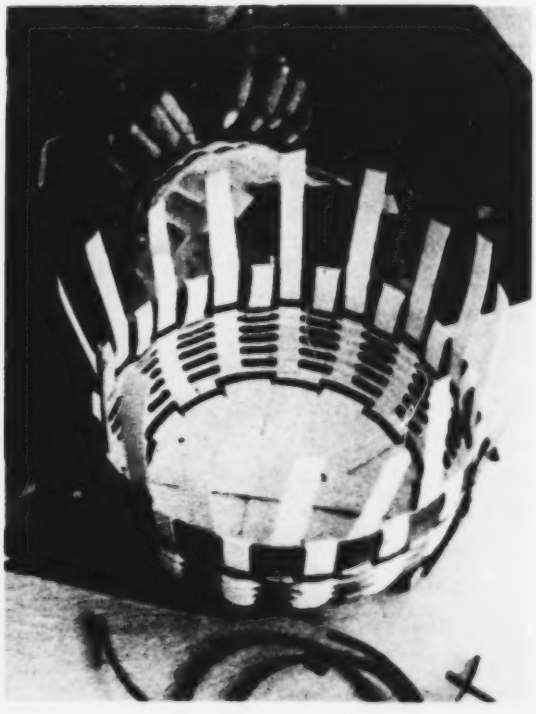


Skill in weaving comes only after many years of practical experience. The weaver must learn how to shape the basket according to how the strips feel.



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The style of each basket is a matter of choice for the particular basketmaker.



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A young girl often watches her mother weave baskets for many years before she is able to begin making her own.



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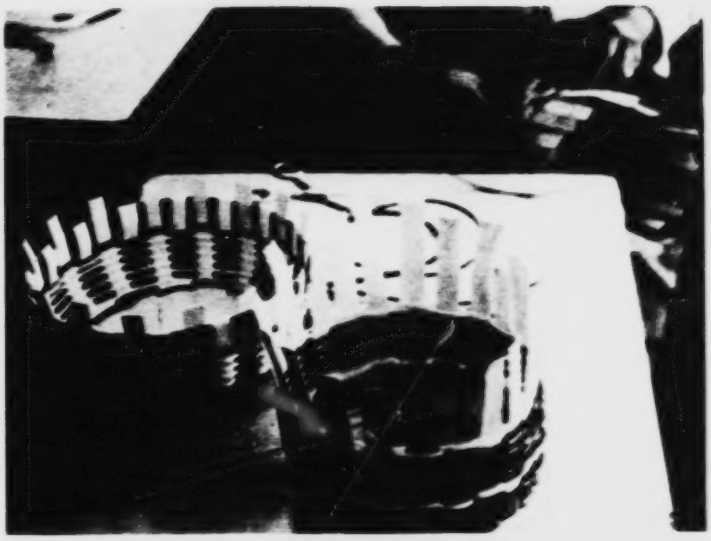

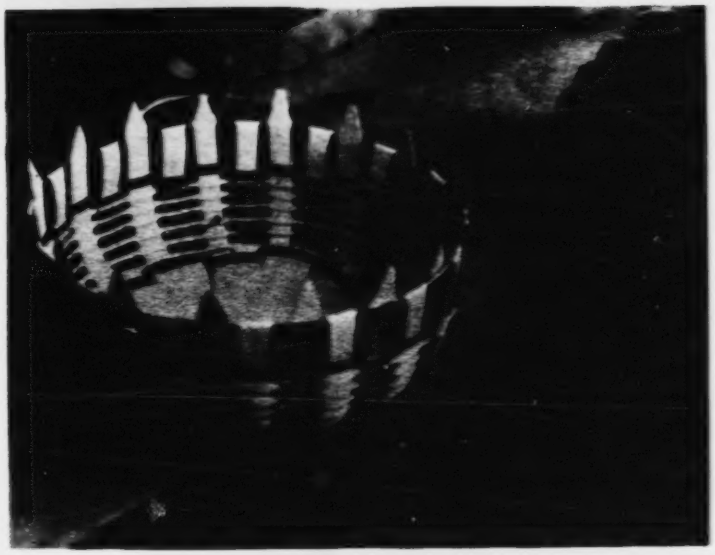

The length of time it takes to weave a basket depends on its size. Several small baskets can be woven in one day. A large basket may take one or two days.

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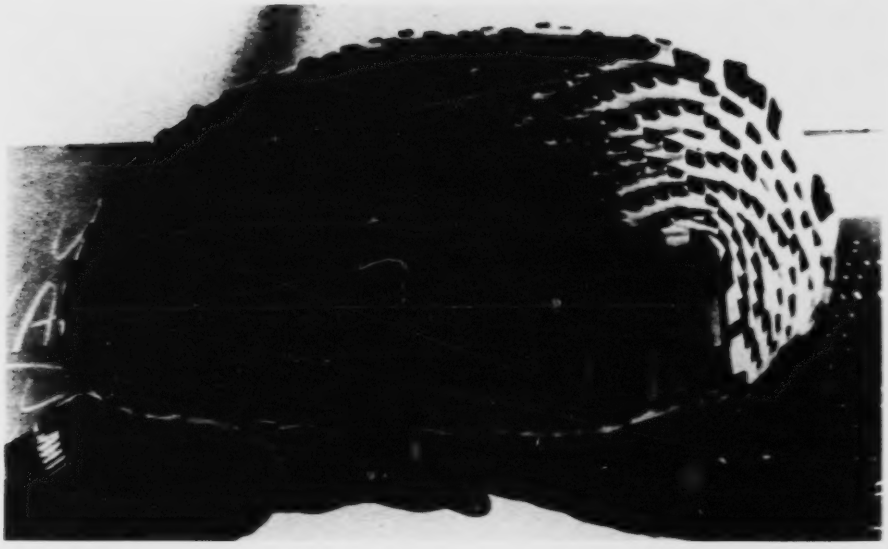
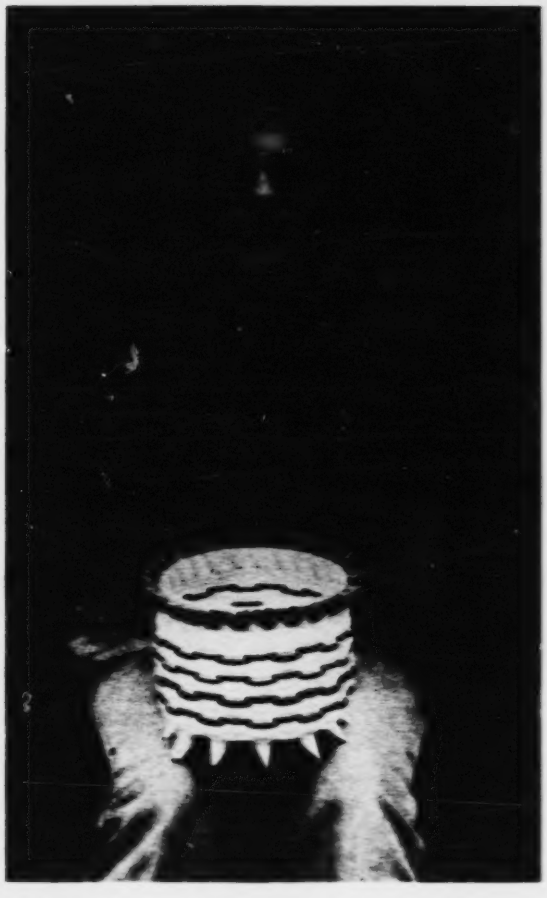


The colors of the decoration reflect the artistic choice of each basketmaker. Some designs are woven right into the basket as it is being made. Other designs are applied at the end.



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Winnebago baskets are made so well that they last for many years.



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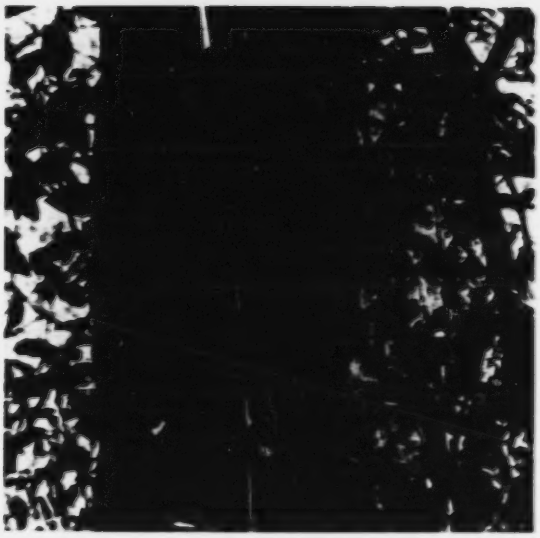
# THE BLACK ASH TREE

The black ash tree grows in swamps and low lying areas. The tree can grow up to eighty feet high. Its trunk reaches between one and two feet in diameter. The growth layers of the tree are used in making barrel hoops, chair caning, as well as in basketmaking.



*Bark of the black ash.*

The trunk of the bark is dark and furrowed and somewhat scaly.

*Leaves of the black ash.*

There are seven to eleven leaves on each twig. The leaves are toothed and dark green in color.



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Center School is an alternative High School located at 2421 Bloomington Avenue South in Minneapolis. The photographs of the basket making were taken at Center School during January, 1979. The students photographed are Karen Summer, Cheryl Thompson, and Barb Thompson.

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The Indian Elementary Curriculum Project was made possible by funds from the State of Minnesota's American Indian Language and Culture Act.

First Printing, June, 1979

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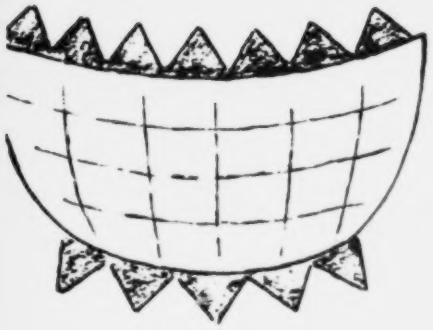

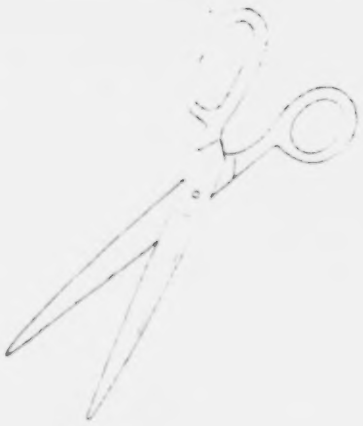

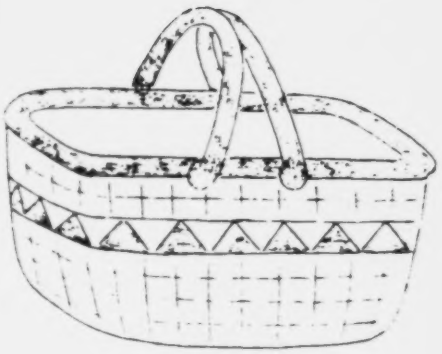

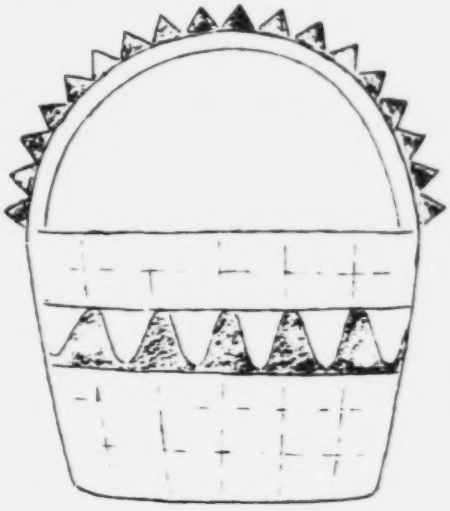

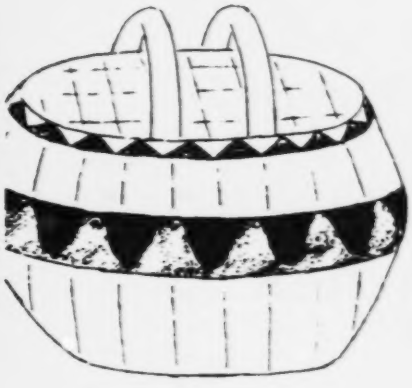

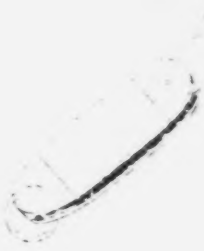

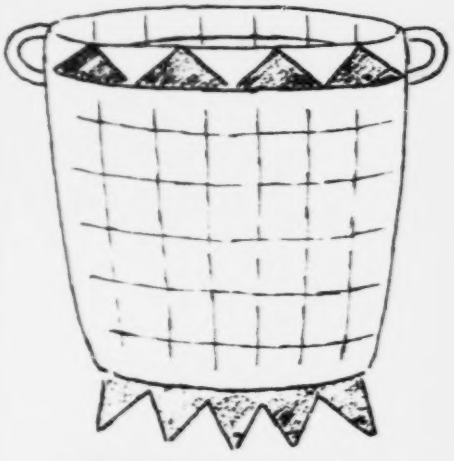



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